



Reading in Parallax: *Two Visions of Media in Kim Jong-un's North Korea*

Millennial North Korea: Forbidden Media and Living Creatively with Surveillance. By Suk-Young Kim. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024. 262 pages. ISBN: 9781503640870.

Rebranding North Korea: Changes in Consumer Culture and Visual Media. By Immanuel Kim. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2025. 258 pages. ISBN: 9780824899738.

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Introduction: Two Frames for the Same Picture

In December 2025, the South Korean Ministry of Unification (MOU) released its latest figures on North Korean defectors. The numbers tell an interesting story. After rising through most of the period since the late 1990s, defector arrivals peaked at 2,914 in 2009 and then began a gradual decline around the time Kim Jong-un came to power in 2012. The decline turned into a collapse in 2020, when only 229 people arrived. The figure has climbed again since 2023, but it remains far below earlier levels: against 1,047 arrivals in 2019, the 223 in 2025 is roughly a fifth (MOU 2025). The 2020 drop is easy enough to explain—it follows from the border closures of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the gradual decline already underway around 2012, and the fact that the numbers have not recovered even after the border partially reopened in 2023, invite more than one explanation. Had border controls tightened? Had new technologies been folded into the surveillance apparatus after COVID? Had punishment for those caught crossing grown harsher? Had some of the reasons people once left been, in part, resolved? The decline suggests a tangle of causes rather than any single

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one. Whichever cause turns out to be decisive, the fact itself leads many researchers to the same question. Has something inside North Korea changed under Kim Jong-un? Might that change be one of the things shaping the decline in defections?

At the moment when the shrinking number of defectors has narrowed the window of testimony, two books help answer this question. Suk-Young Kim's *Millennial North Korea: Forbidden Media and Living Creatively with Surveillance* (2024) and Immanuel Kim's *Rebranding North Korea: Changes in Consumer Culture and Visual Media* (2025) try to read North Korea through different windows. Both analyze post-2012 North Korea through media and technology, and both look at the same phenomena and the same subjects from different angles. As testimony grows scarcer, the very method of reading the North Korean interior is put to the test. Suk-Young Kim works mainly from the recollections of those who left before the window narrowed; Immanuel Kim works from the texts the state itself makes, speaking of changes visible without leaving the country. If testimony comes from the past, and the texts the state makes hint at what it reaches toward, then the two may be looking at different North Koreas. A cross-reading of the two books allows us to see different faces of one image.

What are we seeing in North Korea now, and what do we want to see? This essay examines the perspectives, methods, and objects each of the above authors chooses, and follows the concepts each puts to central use. It shows how the two books' arguments speak to each other, or pull against each other, and poses some productive questions about North Korea's present.

Allegories of Vision: Rubin's Vase and the Logic of Doubleness

Rubin's Vase: The Politics of Visibility in Rebranding North Korea

Immanuel Kim compares the Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un eras, attending to the changes in visual media that arrived under Kim Jong-un. The allegory he runs through the book is that of Rubin's vase. In the familiar image, two

faces in profile seem to look at each other. Do we look at the foreheads, noses, and lips of the two profiles, or at the image they trace between them, the vase? The point of the allegory is that the two cannot be seen at once: look at the faces and the vase disappears; look at the vase and the faces are gone.

Take the satellite photograph that outside states still reach for when they want to underline North Korean backwardness: the country left dark between a brightly lit China and South Korea. Whether the dark North Korea between them is read as figure or as ground depends on the politics of the gaze. Kim names this darkness *negative space*. Against a darkness read as deprivation and as ideological representation, Kim Jong-un designs a politics of light. The excess illumination of Ryomyong Street, the fountains, the night cityscape—all this is the response to the negative space. Immanuel Kim reads the extravagantly bright, heavily digitized images of Pyongyang's streets, produced for promotion abroad, as the hyperreal in Baudrillard's sense: "These digitized photographic images are precisely what Baudrillard refers to as the fourth order of simulation that produces the hyperreal" (I. Kim 2025, 40). The light of Pyongyang reaches the outside only through those processed images.

The light is excessive. Insofar as the light itself is mediated by image, it too falls within the logic of the hyperreal. On the satellite photograph we know so well, the unlit country with Pyongyang alone blazing as a single point: this produces an image that cracks the allegory of Rubin's vase, the reversal of figure and ground. If Pyongyang's excessive light fails to reverse figure and ground—the dark North Korea between a bright China and South Korea—because Pyongyang is not the *space* between them but a *point* glowing within it, then what does that light do? It does not reflect the real; it replaces it. Pyongyang is a single point, yet rather than reflecting the actual state of the country—the space outside the point still dark—it becomes an image that overwhelms the real. A light brighter than the real is not reference but simulacrum. By this logic, the response to negative space is not to light up the darkness but to produce an excess of brightness. Pyongyang becomes a stage. That stage is a "dangerous luxury" (I. Kim 2025, 38–39) standing in for the real.

The imagined consumer, the concept Kim hones most carefully, can be read through the same allegory. Kim distinguishes the actual consumer from the imagined one: the former, he writes, “might exist,” but it is the imagined consumer that “is the point of reference through whom these products impact” (I. Kim 2025, 195). The consumers who appear in the country’s recent television dramas, like the excess light, do not reflect a reality so much as present an image imagined by the state. What Kim analyzes is this reference point, not the actual consumer, and the choice is a deliberate, methodological one. To follow what such a method makes visible and what it leaves out of sight is itself one revealing way to read his book.

Doubleness: Between Performance and Practice in *Millennial North Korea*

Suk-Young Kim’s conceptual map is organized by the language of doubleness. The two phrasings she works with, *Millennial North Korea* and *North Korean millennials*, carry different subjects and thus point in different directions. She separates millennial North Korea, a time and a place, from the North Korean millennials who are its subjects. If the former is the changing North Korea seen from outside, the latter are subjects who enact a bottom-up mode. The millennial generation is the cohort active as the state’s youth under Kim Jong-un, or those born between 1981 and 1996 (S. Kim 2024, 7); but what matters more than the boundary of birth years is the way of living through which they take up and claim *millennial* itself as a constructed, claimed, and performed generational identity (S. Kim 2024, 8). In the doubleness of the members of this generation, who live strategically as socialists by day and capitalists by night (S. Kim 2024, 63), Kim reads North Korea’s change.

This doubleness is not only a figure of speech. One of Kim’s interviewees, Jeong Yu-na (born in Hoeryeong in 1988, left North Korea in 2008), gives it a concrete shape: “Young people change the way they talk following the spoken language of South Korean dramas. We call young couples who watch South Korean dramas together a ‘-ji-ji’ couple, since North Korean sentences

do not end with ‘-ji,’ but South Korean sentences do” (S. Kim 2024, 77). The night’s viewing leaves a trace on the day’s speech. This is the “hidden script,” Kim cited, in the South Korean political scientist Joo Hyung-min’s term (S. Kim 2024, 76), that is never quite hidden: the borrowed sentence-ending slips out and marks the speaker.

For Suk-Young Kim, this doubleness is not confined to the performance of citizens; it extends to the very media they rely on. The medium she treats as most important in the book is the cell phone. Before the cell phone, there was the USB stick. Kim describes how people once bought USB drives at the market and went home to see what was on them; now, with the phone, the drive is plugged in on the spot, its contents checked and bought then and there (S. Kim 2024, 52). The cell phone gathers what the USB had carried, and makes it immediate and mobile. The cell phone works as an instrument of state surveillance and, at the same time, as a channel that creates an alternative social and cultural life (S. Kim 2024, 88). The efforts those who pass forbidden media back and forth make to protect one another’s identities, and the methods they devise, paradoxically confirm and keep the surveillance apparatus running. In one device, oppression operates and freedom is practiced at the same time.

What the reader should watch for is whether that doubleness still holds as a frame when Kim turns to her analysis of the North Korean millennials who take in South Korean dramas and films. Whether it shows us two faces, or two variations on one face—that question can be taken up more fully in the section on method.

Both Immanuel Kim’s and Suk-Young Kim’s books analyze the mediascape shared by the same generation, those who might be called millennials, in the same period after Kim Jong-un took power. But figure and ground are constantly reversed. If Immanuel Kim’s ambivalence is an epistemological approach, Suk-Young Kim’s is a performative one. Put the image the state projects in the foreground and the user’s performance recedes into the background; reverse the two and the same thing happens the other way. The two books’ methods, then, cannot be seen at once. The reader, however, taking them together, can move the gaze from figure to ground and from ground to figure. A reading that follows the gaze of the

one who watches the imagined image crosses with a reading that follows the actor moving between day and night. The pleasure of reading these two books is to watch that reversal, to find the dynamic tension between them.

Whose Millennial? Parallax and the Politics of Method

The reversal between the two books does not give rise to a difference of viewpoint alone. Something is folded into the gap between them. Both books seem to examine the millennial generation. Neither author has declared that they write about the same moment, but the rhetoric of “North Korea after Kim Jong-un” produces that illusion. This section takes up the generational and spatial disjuncture between the two books. It is not a classification error but a kind of parallax. The parallax the two books produce is a measurement of the speed of change in the Kim Jong-un era, and the two books show us the methods by which that speed is measured.

As noted earlier, Suk-Young Kim calls those born between 1981 and 1996 the millennial generation. Other names for them include the *jangmadang* (black market) generation and the Gangnam generation—the generation that enjoys the culture from south across the river (S. Kim 2024, 9). Immanuel Kim offers no such explicit definition, but he pays attention to what might be called the “cosmopolitan” subject (I. Kim 2025, 5) of the post-2012 generation. Where Immanuel Kim works with North Korean news segments, dramas, and policy statements and proclamations, Suk-Young Kim works with interviews of resettled defectors. In chapters 3 and 4 she discusses the South Korean dramas that shaped defectors and the films that resonated with them, but the support for that analysis, too, rests largely on the interviews. When Kim cites a defector’s interview, she gives the exact years of when the person left North Korea and when they resettled in the South. The range runs from 1998 to 2020, but the weight falls in the middle of the 2010s: of the 16 she interviewed directly, the largest cluster left between 2014 and 2018. Their North Korea, then, is for the most part the North Korea of the early-to-mid 2010s, recalled from the far side of departure.

As someone who works on defector memoirs and on the films and literature that take defectors as their subject, I keep returning to one checkpoint of my own: the awareness that the North Korea they recall and the North Korea I am looking at may differ in temporal and spatial sense. The time when an interviewee left North Korea and the time of the media experience they recall might not align with each other. Testimony is always at risk of being doubly pushed into the past. The present we look at is a *past-ified* present.

The temporal coordinate carries a spatial one with it. Suk-Young Kim's foreground is the border cities. Cities like Hyesan and Musan, where cellphone signals reach across the Chinese border, brought a shift in the paradigm of North Korea's spatial hierarchy (S. Kim 2024, 58), which had been narrated only with Pyongyang at its center. Her gaze rests outside the capital. Her interviewees bear this out: most come from the border regions and the north—Hoeryeong, Hyesan, Ryanggang, Chongjin—though a few are from Pyongyang. This is less a matter of choice than of who leaves at all; South Korean government figures show that the overwhelming majority of those who have resettled came from the border provinces of North Hamgyong and Ryanggang.¹ Immanuel Kim, by contrast, when he speaks of the imagined consumer and the imagined space, keeps at the center of his thinking the place where the one who imagines resides—Pyongyang. Pyongyang as North Korea's "Manhattan or Gangnam" (I. Kim 2025, 101), Pyongyang as the stage of refinement, *seryon* (I. Kim 2025, 143). Neither book reaches the spaces that lie between Pyongyang and the border cities. For now these cities do not exist even between figure and ground (this is, of course, a limit of the available sources).

These two books bring on the illusion of the same era, the same generation, the same North Korea, but the disjuncture they finally show is itself a record of the change we can infer inside North Korea after Kim Jong-un came to power. A considerable number of Suk-Young Kim's interviewees remember a North Korea of the mid-2010s; the dramas Immanuel Kim takes up are largely works of 2020 to 2023—*21 Seconds* (2020), *Final Match*

1. Of 34,430 resettlers recorded by the MOU as of December 2025, 20,059 came from North Hamgyong and 6,201 from Ryanggang—together roughly three-quarters of the total.

(2022), *Memoir of a Prosecutor* (2023). If the two stand about a decade apart, these space-time coordinates lead us to wonder whether, over that short—if it is short—span, there was inside North Korea a *speed battle* in the most literal sense.

If the strategic resistance that Suk-Young Kim's subjects speak of is a remembered resistance (the past), the cosmopolitan subject Immanuel Kim describes is a planned subject, one yet to arrive (the future). The past and the future are the two ends of the parallax I am pointing to. The present keeps slipping. The empty frame between the two, the present, is empty.

In the end, each method—which objects one worked with—produces different coordinates. Settler interviews come from the border zones one could leave; official media reflects the capital the state puts on display. The two methods bring figure and ground into view differently. If there is a single figure caught at once in both frames, it would be Kim Jong-un. As Suk-Young Kim notes, Kim Jong-un is himself a millennial (S. Kim 2024, 10). He is a subject who holds two different coordinates in one body: the new generation, or the future to come, and at the same time the inheritor of the Paektu bloodline, the past. If in both books the present keeps slipping and stays empty, it is Kim Jong-un's body that fills that empty present. That present is exactly the place where Juche ideology is still at work (I return to this below).

The parallax I am pointing to is not confined to time and space. If there is one more, it is a parallax of mediation, a frame within a frame. In chapters 3 and 4 in *Millennial North Korea*, where the book analyzes how defectors experienced South Korean dramas and films while they were still in North Korea, it draws actively on their testimony. The argument is that works circulating quietly inside the country helped form a millennial identity within North Korea. Yet much of the testimony cited for this plausible argument is secondary material—defectors' interviews on variety shows, reaction content on YouTube channels. Secondary material, as is well known, passes through several layers of mediation. Beyond the mediation of the defector's memory, there is the character of the program, the character of the YouTube channel itself, the character of the reaction format that happens to be in fashion. However, a narrative supported by interviews does not

show those layers. The testimony is cited as if it were raw, and the layers flatten—because of the structural nature of the interview and of the medium.

Crash Landing on You, a recent drama, is widely known to have passed through the testimony and consultation of defectors from its production stage onward. When the drama aired, a drama into which defector testimony had gone as part of its material was watched by other defectors, who testified in interviews that the North Korea inside the drama was uncannily the same (S. Kim 2024, 130). Collective testimony certifies the very image that collective testimony had produced. This looks like direct verification, but it may be no more than a recognition of one's own testimony (the consultation) returning through a mediation (the drama)—a structure of a mirror reflecting a mirror. The more the proposition holds that South Korean media shaped the identity of a North Korean generation, the more a method resting on defector interviews—a frame within a frame, generated inside South Korea—comes to resemble a closed circuit. There is, of course, no reason to assume the author is unaware of this circuit. To be aware of being inside the circuit is not the same as to mistake oneself for seeing outside it. Suk-Young Kim's findings hold; what matters is that we, as readers, know them to be findings made inside the circuit. This closed circuit is not a flaw peculiar to her book but a condition that any study drawing on defector testimony now shares.

The parallax these two books reveal—across time, space, and the frame of mediation—shows once again that studies reading North Korea always slip past its present. The outside observer pushes North Korea into the past or the future, and the North Korea of here and now is left a blank. Parallax measures that slippage; but more than a measure of speed, it is now a diagnostic that exposes how the outside gaze keeps emptying out North Korea's present.

Consumer or User?

Neither author reads North Korea as a single mass. Each author captures

this internal differentiation through a different subject: the consumer and the user. The consumer that Immanuel Kim makes central and the user that Suk-Young Kim describes are, in the end, two names for one desire—the desire to watch. What differs is the range that desire reaches. Immanuel Kim’s consumer desires the imagined image the state projects and wants to take part in it; the user, in Suk-Young Kim, shares content the state did not make, passing it hand to hand through networks of trust between people. One looks at what the state holds up; the other looks past it. They are not opposites so much as two arcs of the same wish, drawn toward different horizons.

Immanuel Kim’s consumer watches “television series, news reports, advertisements, films” and comes to “imagine oneself participating in this new consumer market” (I. Kim 2025, 117). However, they do not simply insert themselves into the image the state projects and move uncritically toward that reference point. For them, “the daily experience of negotiating both the collective political consciousness and the personal consumerist desires simultaneously...is a cultural behavior and practice” (I. Kim 2025, 117–118). Kim pushes his own insight further: “political ideology and national allegiance have never been the sole determinants that defined the North Korean citizen” (I. Kim 2025, 118), and North Koreans as consumers may “overlook some political discrepancies and faults as long as their consumerist desires are being satisfied” (I. Kim 2025, 119). Here the North Korean consumer is named a *citizen*. The political ideology and performance that an outsider might imagine to be the most decisive thing of all, the argument goes, may recede into the background.

Consumption in North Korea, unlike in a capitalist society, takes the form of a particular entanglement of state and capital. From whatever single coordinate one looks, then, as one side comes to the foreground, the other withdraws into the background. As Immanuel Kim notes the role of the *donju* in today’s North Korea (I. Kim 2025, 96) and the joint ventures of private and public capital (I. Kim 2025, 18), he points out that the top-down model is already wavering. The top-down separation that had been imagined as cleanly divided turns out not to come so easily.

How the two authors read Ri Sol-ju, North Korea’s current first lady,

shows well how the perspectives of consumer and user work. Immanuel Kim takes Ri Sol-ju as image and spectacle. The North Korean consumer imagines participating in the consumer market through the “optics of the fashionable First Lady Ri Sol Ju” (2025, 117); when “Kim Jong Un and his wife, Ri Shol Ju [Ri Sol-ju], visit[ed] Haemaji Café as a way of advertising its grand opening to the public” (I. Kim 2025, 133), consumers took visual pleasure in a space of the highest luxury. For him, Ri Sol-ju is an image the state produces, a reference point that makes one desire to consume.

Suk-Young Kim, by contrast, sees Ri Sol-ju as a source of imitation. The first spouse of a North Korean leader to appear before the public, Ri Sol-ju graced “the front pages of domestic and international media with her youthful looks and high fashion. She quickly became the icon of the new North Korean woman, often inspiring her followers to emulate her signature ‘party-leader’ (*dangganbu*) style exuding affluence and power” (S. Kim 2024, 13). For Suk-Young Kim, Ri Sol-ju is something imitated from below, a source that North Korean users perform. The same figure is, on one side, an image one watches, and on the other, a practice one enacts.

This enacting subject is what Suk-Young Kim calls the user, and the user exercises *reactive creativity*. They are seen “starting with how they dodge regulations to obtain means of communication...reacting to the impossible conditions of life invites creative measures that break taboos and prohibitions daring to go against the punitive law and constant surveillance” (S. Kim 2024, 75). The ways and routes by which the user circulates content lie always outside what the state anticipates. Suk-Young Kim gives the example of students who circulated foreign games with some ingenuity. The secondhand computers North Korea imported from China, Taiwan, and Singapore still held foreign films and video games. The students assigned to wipe the machines copied this strange and interesting content, and it “soon started to circulate in North Korea” (S. Kim 2024, 43). The content moved student to student, outside the state’s projection, through hands that trusted one another. For her, the user is a more active subject. Yet, as the passage that gives reactive creativity its substance already shows, the acts sit on different registers. To dodge regulations is closer to adaptation; to go against the punitive law and constant surveillance is closer to resistance. The

concept of reactive creativity moves back and forth between this adaptation and resistance.

Both books speak of a split between the outer shell of the political subject and the inner life of practice. For Immanuel Kim, the outward imaging and the imagined structure fill the interior; for Suk-Young Kim, the interior bypasses the exterior. From the same structure they read directions that run opposite each other. However, the tidy division into interior and exterior is something the books invite more than something they assert, and the invitation may be worth resisting. Compliance and noncompliance do not divide cleanly; rather, that the two coexist without being resolved may itself be the operating logic of the Kim Jong-un-era system.

Post-Juche, and the Return of the Vase

At the outset of this essay, I posed a question the public might share at this moment—has anything changed inside North Korea since Kim Jong-un came to power, and if so, what kind of change?—and said that these two books answer it. Having passed through the concepts of consumer and user, I return to that question, and another arises: in the face of the changes in the mediascape these two authors point to, and the changes in the subject as consumer and user, what becomes of the fate of the ideology that has long held North Korean society together?

If there is a frame that has held North Korea up, it is, beyond the hereditary succession of the Kim family, Juche ideology. Juche is not a matter of believing or not believing; it is something like the air that fills every corner of North Korean society. It is not a creed held as a proposition but a frame that operates. At the present moment, when words like user and consumer have become valid for North Koreans, this new identity comes up against the frame that had settled in. The new self-recognition as consumer and user, that is, makes the once-invisible Juche visible.

The notion of *Juche*—self-reliance—is a capacious one. Immanuel Kim states plainly that he is “using Juche as a discursive and corporate branding strategy for North Koreans to consume without processing what it means”

(I. Kim 2025, 14), and that for years “the North Korean state advertised Juche, and the people bought it wholesale” (I. Kim 2025, 14). He throws out, fairly radically, the phrase *post*-Juche society. Nonetheless, there is no need to take the “post” as the end of the age of Juche. It can be read to mean that as North Korea enters a post-socialist era, a consumer society in its own kind, it is rebranding Juche itself—and must. Strictly speaking this is not *post* at all; returning to the Rubin’s vase allegory on which Immanuel Kim builds his frame, it is nothing other than the state in which Juche has been backgrounded, made into ground.

Suk-Young Kim, for her part, does not refer to Juche directly, but it surfaces in the political performance of the users. The millennials, with a particular performative agility, stage a doubled loyalty. They are, for instance, “walking through the uncertain space, they stage their dual allegiance to the rising materialism, new media, market network, on the one hand, and the Kim family worship, North Korean state, collectivism, on the other hand” (S. Kim 2024, 62). In such acts they are “testing the limits just enough to evade punishment” (S. Kim 2024, 62). Somewhere in that adaptation and resistance noted earlier, political ideology will be understood and defined differently each time.

Even if one grants that Juche is being backgrounded, the ground does not disappear. As in the Rubin’s vase image, a single switch of the gaze can return the ground to the foreground. They come back in the North Korean nuclear crises that return whenever they are about to be forgotten, in moments of inter-Korean tension, in the discourse of U.S.–DPRK tension, in moments when sanctions are tightened. The question Kim Jong-un’s regime faces in actual politics is perhaps this very one: how to keep nearly sixty-year-old Juche as a still-mobilizable background. Visual rebranding is part of the answer, as Immanuel Kim points out; and so too, perhaps, is the new understanding that settles into the place a Juche-made concept has erased—the understanding of trust caught in the defector interviews Suk-Young Kim cites: “trust has everything to do with your capability” (S. Kim 2024, 82), or a trust, “a word or concept that just does not exist in his world of experience” (S. Kim 2024, 83). A new understanding moving into that vacated place may be part of the answer too.

Even granting that the concept is changing or being rebranded, I want to return once more to the literal meaning of Juche and ask: if Kim Jong-un is the body that appears as a phenomenon at both coordinates, past and future, and if the ideological condition of that body was Juche, then can the generation North Korea now faces and cultivates operate without Juche? Or can it operate only within a new negotiation with Juche?

Conclusion: What Do We Want to See, and What Are They Becoming?

Both books see change in North Korea after Kim Jong-un took power. What they see is the same change and a different one—and so reading the two together, one on top of the other, is an active way of seeing more than one face at once. The two books stand in counterpoint: two lines moving independently, sounding together.

Immanuel Kim argues that consumerism can give North Koreans a measure of satisfaction that releases them from the need to respond politically. Read one way, this suggests that the regime's consumer-centered turn only strengthens its authoritarian hold; he writes that letting consumers dictate demand will "bolster the decrepit economy without necessarily diminishing the political power of Kim Jong Un and the oligarchs" (I. Kim 2025, 199). However, the change is not one-directional. Even if the power holds, it is no longer power of the same kind. Whether the regime intends it or is aware of it or not, the system and its people are transforming each other.

To whom does this way of reading Kim Jong-un's North Korea appeal, and how will it be read? The two books have different addressees in mind. Immanuel Kim's account, centered on the regime and the Pyongyang elite, risks being read as an endorsement of the state's own narrative of successful rebranding; Suk-Young Kim's risks satisfying readers who hope to see cracks opening inside North Korea. This is less a choice either author made than a hazard built into the materials themselves: to analyze images the state produces is to risk recirculating them, just as to draw on the testimony of those who left is to risk seeing only departure. These two addressees, in turn,

mirror the desires of the two authors. What do they want to see in North Korea? Seeing change, seeing cracks, must be distinguished from wanting to see them—the wish can quietly furnish the finding. The same question falls, too, on us, who are reading the two books. What are we seeing in North Korea now, and what do we want to see?

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